

Chancellor's Notes

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools, and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

October 23, 2009

Persevering Through Difficult Economic Times

Guided by the fact that education is the foundation of a city's growth and economy, Mayor Fenty has done everything possible to shelter schools from the budget cuts that companies, public agencies, school districts and individuals across the country have felt over the past few years.

Unfortunately, as part of a citywide budget shortfall, this year the school system has shouldered some of that loss of resources through an unexpected budget cut that required a reduction in our teaching force.

School-Year Budgets Living in a Fiscal-Year-Budget World: Yearly Equalization

As I reported in a [Chancellor's Notes on Equalization](#) last fall, every spring, schools must do their best to predict how many students will attend the following year. They use these projections to create school budgets based on a fiscal year that begins after the school year is already in session, and those budgets determine the hiring needs of the school. Once those needs are established, principals begin hiring teachers for the next year.

Unfortunately, the accuracy of our enrollment projections is not revealed until the fall, when students actually enroll and attend. This discrepancy in timing between the school year beginning, and a budgeting system based on a fiscal year that begins in October, creates a challenge every year that causes some disruption in classrooms. Some principals in the system inevitably end up with too many teachers for the size of the student body, while other schools have too few.

Districts then move staff around in an equalization process to accommodate student need across the system. Last year, we managed to absorb the cost of the extra teachers, without having to move many around or remove positions from the system. We anticipated a similar process this year.

Equalization, Increased Summer Hiring Based on Budgetary Authority, and an Unexpected Late Summer Cut

However, we faced an unexpected \$21M budget shortfall in addition to the equalization process. It occurred after a summer hiring of more teachers than in the past. New positions—each of which had full budgetary authority for hiring—reflected an earlier change in our budgeting process to push more money to schools while increasing equity across the system. This new process, the Comprehensive Staffing Model (CSM), was reviewed and approved by the DC Council, which provides budget oversight for DCPS.

The mayor's budget provided added positions in special education and supported the CSM, which resources schools to provide core positions. The CSM increases schools' ability to be more competitive with higher performing districts. It also responds to parents' rightful demands that all schools have needed resources such as music and art instruction, adding fairness to students across different wards

(When we discovered that many students did not have art, music, PE, counselors and a number of other resources, we corrected this by creating a model and a responsible budgeting process to match it).

Unfortunately, when the budget was cut due to economic pressures, the fact that we had moved more dollars to schools meant we had to cut some positions from schools, including teaching positions.

Bottom line: A very difficult challenge had to be met after the school year began.

Change is Difficult: Including Performance in the Anatomy of a Lay-off

When we learned of the shortfall and realized that some school positions would be cut, according to [DC law for a reduction in force](#), we used school needs, principal-rated performance and contributions of staff, supplemental professional experiences, such as training, as demonstrated on the job, and seniority to decide which positions and staff would be cut from school budgets.

As you might imagine, for a system accustomed to decisions on staffing based on seniority alone, this decision has caused some debate. However, especially in a situation as painful as a lay-off, prioritizing student and school needs along with staff contributions, is simply a commonsense approach to minimizing the impact of a bad situation.

I hope to be clear to any who are making assumptions about teachers who lost their jobs, that this approach does not mean that all DCPS former staff were poor educators. Performance was not the only factor in a decision to lay off an employee. For example, if two strong educators held positions at a school that could only support one due to low enrollment, a talented educator with less experience than his or her colleague would have lost his or her job to the struggling economy.

While we have made some hard decisions and our hearts are with the hard working DCPS staff who lost their jobs, I am confident that including school needs and staff performance was the right decision for children.

School Leadership in a Reduction in Force

While the majority of schools was not significantly affected by the reduction in force (of 123 schools, 102 lost two positions or less), some have suggested that principals should not be allowed to rate their own school needs and staff members.

Principals are the instructional leaders of their schools, and they are held accountable for their results. As you may know, last year we married the new school budgeting model described above, to an aggressive principal recruitment campaign and hired 49 new principals, which also generated some criticism. Yet last year on our local test, the DC CAS, new principals outpaced the district as a whole in student growth.

To hold principals accountable for results in student growth, and then tie their hands regarding the staffing decisions that impact those results, is neither sound management nor a commonsense approach to raising student achievement levels.

Using Stimulus Funds to Prevent Other Cuts

Many have asked us why we could not have used stimulus funds to avoid removing staff. Fortunately, stimulus funds for the fiscal year 2010 did allow us to preserve the Comprehensive Staffing Model which

keeps money at the school level and empowers principals to make staffing decisions for their schools, knowing that they are held accountable for overall school performance.

Stimulus funds also allowed us to preserve as many jobs as possible through state stabilization funds thanks to the president's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: \$39.3 state stabilization dollars are funding educator salaries in 2010. However, Title I stimulus funds, as well as those granted under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), must follow the same federal guidelines as all federal funds, including spending requirements and restrictions in Title I districts.

I was a little surprised to hear one local leader at a hearing last week, reject the legal reasons for spending stimulus funds responsibly, suggesting that we use it to save jobs anyway. I hope it is clear that this line of reasoning is simply not one we can take into consideration. We are not in a position to ignore federal regulations and guidelines.

Most importantly, to do so would keep DCPS in its singular high risk status with the Department of Education for the mismanagement of federal funds, which means that we could lose millions of federal dollars that we depend upon to educate students.

Maintaining Perspective: DC Students Outpacing the Country in Academic Growth

As children often do, students in DC have come through during this difficult time to remind us of their remarkable capabilities, defying the many naysayers who told me two years ago that the school district of DC was a lost war for the prosperity of children's minds.

Last week the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—a national test ranking students across the country in math and reading—released its math results. In academic progress, the students of Washington, DC are showing the aptitude for learning that some believed had been eclipsed by the difficult life circumstances that come with living in an urban district.

- DCPS had the greatest gains of any state in 4th grade math. DCPS increased by 5 points while the nation remained flat.
- In 4th grade, DCPS *was the only district in the country* to see gains in every subgroup. African-American students, students on free and reduced lunch, English Language Learners, students with IEPs.... Compared to the nation, they knocked it out of the park.
- DC is one of only five states to show increases in math for both grades (4th and 8th): District of Columbia, Nevada, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont.
- Our 8th grade growth was 3 times the national average.

Now *that's* what I'm talking about! Yes, we all can agree that we still have much work to do before any parent would be confident with his or her child in any classroom within DCPS. However, this is encouraging data, especially in light of the fact that NAEP is a gold-standard assessment administered from the outside, and it is not aligned to the DC CAS test we prepare for in schools. Combined with our local test scores showing steady gains, there is simply no way to viably deny that we are making real progress.

Moving Forward Through Hard Decisions

From removing principals to closing schools, the decisions of the past two years have not been easy, and at times have created roiling controversy. But you do not move a mountain-sized bureaucracy without raising some dust and upending a few stones along the way. Students are making it absolutely clear that with the right decisions by adults, they can defy every stereotype there is.

The changes we will continue to confront on the way from failure to excellence are bound to be hard and sometimes even painful, but I am confident that they are growing pains. If through economic and other challenges, we maintain the courage to identify and release the practices that have stymied student achievement for decades, recent academic gains will be just the beginning of what we can do.

Even in difficult economic circumstances, as a city we can give students the equal shot at life that adult priorities have long denied them. If we maintain our focus, the mountain will yield to our collective determination and our unwavering belief in over 45,000 bright and beautiful children who are depending on us.

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